CITY PLANNING AND HOUSING

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THERE are two distinct classes of lands in a city, with the arrangement of which city planning is concerned in two very distinct ways.

On the one hand are the lands to be devoted to the various public services. Of these by far the greatest part are devoted primarily to transportation, including streets, railways of all sorts, and waterways. The remaining lands devoted to public services, parks, playgrounds, schools, the various branches of public administration and of public-service corporations, need not be enumerated in detail. The main thesis of city planning is that those who are responsible for protecting the interests of the community ought to plan a suitable arrangement of lands and equipment for the efficient performance of these common services. This is the obvious work of city planning enormously complicated, it is true, but in essence just what a man does when he figures the requirements of a manufacturing plant, selects a suitable site, buys it, and proceeds in due course with the development of the plant.

On the other hand, city planning is also concerned with the arrangement and adaptation to use of the lands which are not acquired for any public service but are left for private occupancy, chiefly for housing. This concern is direct and inevitable from the fact that the location of a complex network of streets, railways, waterways, parks and other public-service properties, amounting in some cases to something like half of the total city area, necessarily cuts up all the remaining city land into fragments whose size and shape and topographical characteristics have the utmost influence upon the efficiency with which they can be used for any given purpose. It is as much the concern of city planning to secure blocks and lots well fitted for use as to get good railroad terminals. But in addition to this

direct determination of the size and shape of the private lands, city planning includes a large amount of indirect and negative control over the developments upon these lands. This is exercised through the prohibitions and regulations of the building and sanitary laws and through the incidence of taxation. This much by way of definition.

Those whose primary interest is in the promotion of better housing conditions must be deeply concerned with the development of the transportation system as a whole and with other general aspects of city planning; but that concern they share with all the other interests of the city and we need not now discuss it in detail. The points at which city planning and housing overlap and coalesce are chiefly in the fixing of depth of block and lot, width and treatment of street, height and thickness of permissible buildings to be used for housing, and the relations of all of these to one another. I cannot in a brief paper discuss all these subjects systematically, and will merely touch on a few points that seem to me rather critical.

One point is that there are great differences in the depth of lot which is desirable for housing purposes. The best type of housing for one time and place may be a very bad type of housing for another time or another place. The depth of lot suitable for one type may be a physical or economic misfit for another type.

Consider first the detached suburban house in a garden plot on inexpensive land. This may be anything from the cheapest little shack that can give healthful shelter for a workman's family to a palace with a retinue of servants. Assuming in each case the best and most economic solution of the problem, in other words assuming that each household is to get the best money's worth for the money expended, the most satisfactory and profitable depth of lot is likely to be in either case upwards of 150 feet in depth. It might be a quarter of a mile or more.

Consider next the structurally economical rows of single family houses separated only by party walls. These may vary in size and cost through almost as wide a range as the detached houses. Sometimes they can profitably be provided with gardens, sometimes with no more space outside the walls of the

houses than is needed for light and air and means of access. I have seen long rows of laborers' cottages in England where the buildings were not 20 feet deep, each having a narrow strip of garden behind it, 200 feet in depth, every foot of it used to the utmost. I know private dwellings in New York 100 feet deep from front to rear, at least on the ground floor, without an inch of land at the back and with so little land in front that the door-steps and the balconies occupy the public street on sufferance. And again, at Tooting, the London County Council built rows of workmen's houses about 25 feet deep with back yards so small that I should not have felt it safe to swing a cat in some I visited. Yet the dwellings were good ones of their kind in all three cases and the land was effectively used.

Finally we have the multiple-family dwellings: two-family houses, assimilated in physical requirements to the previous class, tenement houses, apartments and hotels of every accepted type, the detached four-family house of the Boston suburbs, the rows of new-law tenements in New York, as deep as the law allows, the huge German model tenements with their interior courts, so spacious-looking and attractive in the pictures, the Mills hotels, the Waldorf, and my friend Atterbury's suburban apartment hotel at Forest Hills Gardens with its rambling plan, its eight-story tower and daylight all around.

There is a natural tendency upon the part of the housing reformer to assume a general superiority for the particular type of housing which he finds best suited to the conditions with which he has been personally concerned—a tendency to regard other types of housing as abnormal and either undesirable or unattainable. At the recent conference on city planning our English friends, Mr. Adams and Mr. Unwin, were so convinced that the English ideal of a house and garden for every family is generally practicable and desirable that they were rather inclined to be impatient with what they seemed to regard as an attitude of complacency on the part of Mr. Veiller in regard to the new-law tenements in New York.

Now I believe that there is a permanently normal field for every one of the types of housing I have mentioned above. The initial difficulty is to tell which type is going to be demanded

in a given locality before laying out the local streets and so fixing the lot depths. Thereafter, throughout the centuries, the recurrent problem is how to meet new conditions which demand a type of housing different from that for which the street layout was originally designed.

No possible ingenuity can devise a plan of streets and blocks that is equally well adapted to radically different types of housing, or one that can be successively used, unchanged, for radically different types without great waste and evil results. It is needless, before this audience, to cite examples of converted dwellings, of the rear tenement, the dark room and other evils resulting from the use of deep lots for urban housing. In cities that have grown untrammeled by any artificial street plans, like the older parts of Boston, for example, the play of economic forces has generally led to the successive subdivision of blocks by minor streets and passages, permitting the use of smaller and smaller lot units, until in places the tide turns, the little lots are re-aggregated into larger units for commercial purposes, and a tendency is apparent to obliterate the minor streets again, at least by bridging them. These readjustments, carried on by private initiative and hampered by the diversity of private interests, are of course incomplete and not altogether admirable in their results; but they are made in response to real demands. It is a serious drawback to many deliberately adopted street plans that they tend to enforce a permanent uniformity and rigidity in the standards of block and lot depth.

It cannot be too often emphasized, as one of the basic features of good city planning, that there should be a marked distinction between thoroughfares on the one hand and strictly local streets on the other; that the thoroughfares, laid out well in advance, should divide the city into blocks of moderate size, to be regarded as permanently fixed; and that the subdivision of each of these blocks by minor streets should be treated as a localized problem, should be adjusted to the expected local uses, and be capable of alteration at any time without interference with the general system of circulation.

Another thing which is made possible by the elimination of all but strictly local traffic from the minor local streets is the

great freedom of treatment in the design of the individual streets which this permits. Under such circumstances the only essential functions which most of them will be called upon to perform are to furnish light and air for the buildings, and a gangway for a small amount of traffic. In the case of very short passages and those at the rear of buildings which have entrances on other streets, they may not have to provide for vehicles at all but only for foot passage.

In point of fact the total extent of paved road and footway that is sufficient to carry with ease all the strictly local traffic of small districts is very much less than the total space that must be left open to provide adequately for the admission of light and air to the lower stories of buildings. Of the open space required for light and air that portion which is not occupied by the necessary extent of public ways is ordinarily taken up in part by private yards, courts and light-shafts, many of which serve no other useful purpose than the admission of light and air and often do that very badly, and in part by portions of the street surface laid out and maintained in excess of the traffic requirements. The latter are generally paved but may be partly or wholly turfed or otherwise ornamented, and they may contribute to public recreation or provide the standing space for sidewalk merchants or serve other purposes aside from those of mere transportation. Not infrequently this extra space in the streets is so treated as to serve no good purpose and, apart from its use in admitting light and air to the abutting buildings, is wasted or worse than wasted, like the wide dusty deserts in certain residential streets.

There is no doubt that better results would often be secured, especially in tenement districts, if nearly all of these fragmentary spaces, both public and private, were aggregated into a series of connecting open spaces,—called streets or courts or restricted areas or what you like—specifically designed of such width in relation to the building masses which intervene between them as to give an equitable distribution of light and air. All or most of these open spaces could profitably be traversed by foot-ways open to public inspection and policing and subject to public maintenance, and many of them by wheel-ways giving

access to the buildings. But since the whole of the open area necessary to give light and air to the buildings would not be required for pavement the remainder would be devoted to other uses; turfed and gardened, or sanded and used for playing, or arranged for any other profitable use not inconsistent with its primary functions. These open spaces might look like streets, they might look like alleys or back yards, they might look like courts or quadrangles with arched entrances, they might look like gardens; but their permanent maintenance as a means of admitting light and air to the buildings would be assured. In tenement districts it is probable that the care and maintenance of the whole of these open spaces by the public would give the best results, whether the surface were all paved or were used partly for greenery or playground; but in many localities all except the portions needed for the time being as public traffic ways could be entrusted to the abutters to care for and use in any manner not inconsistent with public interests. Exactly this thing is done in the case of wide public streets, as notably in Washington, where the portion not needed for traffic is left in the form of front door yards for the use of abutters, pending the arrival of conditions that may make it desirable for the public to re-assume the care and control of the space. I believe it is logical to treat in this way all of the spaces which the interests of the community require to be left permanently free from building, back yards as well as front yards, leaving for the future to determine when, if ever, additional public ways need to be opened through the space originally assigned to back yards and when, if ever, that part of the open space not required for traffic should be withdrawn from private maintenance and kept up by the public.

Mr. Veiller, in his paper at the recent conference on city planning, recommended streets 25 feet apart for workmen's dwellings; explaining later that alternate streets might be largely occupied by turf or playground space. I judge that he calls these spaces streets merely because he thinks they ought to be under public control and maintenance. You will see that I am merely directing your attention to a broad principle of which Mr. Veiller's suggestion is a particular application. The

principle is the same whether the buildings between the open spaces are uniform rows of tenements 25 feet wide, that is to say, two rooms deep, or whether the plan is varied to provide room for structures demanding greater depth, such as large stores, places of entertainment and factories. I do not mention large dwellings among these exceptions, because the city dwellings that cannot be built on a lot 25 feet wide are very few indeed, and everyone knows that a 25-foot house would be better if it had light and air on both long sides instead of on the short ends only. If the open spaces are regarded not as streets, a term associated with long, straight spaces of *uniform* width, but simply as spaces for light and air with other incidental uses, such variation in the width of the building masses becomes perfectly natural and right so long as any encroachment on the open space to give this extra building depth is offset by a compensating alteration of the opposite building line.

The principles as applied to strictly urban areas may be summarized as follows:

1. Within each of the major blocks formed by the thoroughfare system of a city the amount of land to be kept permanently free from buildings in order to ensure adequate light and air should be determined according to the expected uses of the property and in conjunction with regulations as to the height of building. 2. Any arrangement and distribution of this permanent open area (and by consequence of the area which may be built upon solidly) is permissible which meets the requirements, (a) that no solid building area should be unreasonably wide for the class of occupancy proposed; (b) that no portion of the permanent open space upon which a building may be dependent for light and air should be too narrow to serve that purpose adequately in view of the height to which building may be permitted and (c) that the permanent open spaces be so designed that adequate means of access can be constructed through them to all of the buildings. 3. The fee of the permanent open spaces should be vested in the community, although the use and control of such parts of them as are not at once needed for traffic may be entrusted to the occupants of the abutting property. 4. The plan of subdivision of each of these major blocks

should be regarded as independent of the others, and subject to change in case it is called for by a change in the uses of the property.

We need not be unduly frightened by the bugbear that shallow buildings with a relatively long frontage on the street involve an undue cost for street construction. If all the streets are laid out and constructed in a manner fit for main urban thoroughfares the extra charge would be serious, but purely local streets can be considerably cheapened. An allowance of ten dollars a running foot is generally liberal for local streets, making a charge on the lot of five dollars per front foot. For the cheapest classes of housing this can be further reduced; but even at five dollars a front foot, if we suppose that making well lighted shallow buildings would halve the depth, double the frontage, and increase the average street frontage per family from twenty to forty feet, the increased capital investment per family would be only a hundred dollars.

Some increase of cost there is bound to be. The idea that a little ingenuity in the design of streets and buildings will cut out so much of the waste in present methods as to give poor people much better housing for the same money is the dream of amateurs. Commercial competition is now cutting the corners so close that almost any material improvement must be paid for in cash or in the surrender of some other advantage. Dr. Woods Hutchinson has said that if any kind of food costs much less than the standard foods, it is safe to assume that it is either less nutritious, less digestible, or less palatable. It is much the same with housing.

We must exercise ingenuity and effort in getting the most we can for the money; but also we must squarely face the independent necessity of raising the minimum standard of housing cost as high as the community can reasonably afford. Ten acres of floor space can be more cheaply provided in a storage warehouse a hundred feet wide, without any interior light wells or ventilating system, that it possibly can be in any kind of dwellings fit for human habitation.

To take up the control of developments on private property through the police power would land us in the midst of the sub-

ject of housing legislation, upon which others here are far better fitted to speak than I. In connection with city planning at large the subject has received only a very limited and superficial study in this country, but it should be noted that it is a much broader field than mere tenement-house legislation, on which the work of housing reformers has largely been concentrated hitherto. It must deal with the control of all kinds of buildings; with the knotty problem of the sky-scraper office building, with the factory, the hotel and the single-family house as well as with the tenement.

A housing reformer who is looking for practical results may well ask just what he may expect from city planning. Let me answer first as to replanning, as to dealing with existing conditions in already developed urban areas.

Those who discuss city planning from the spectacular standpoint, especially if they be architects with a Parisian background, are apt to create an impression that it runs to what has been called Haussmannizing—the smashing of grand new streets through old quarters and a general reconstructing and modernizing of the defective parts of the city. As a matter of fact, the arbitrary reconstructions suggested by the term Haussmannizing are altogether exceptional and abnormal activities of city planning and so seldom practicable on a considerable scale as to be of minor importance, like the erection of model tenements in housing. The hope of demolishing slum districts wholesale or by arbitrarily converting a district of one kind into a district of a wholly different kind by any process of city planning may be dismissed as futile. There is, however, one feature of city replanning that has a direct bearing on housing of large practical importance. It is the local introduction of intermediate streets in order to reduce block depths as a part of the process of adapting particular quarters of the city to natural changes in occupation. To facilitate this process, to plan in advance the methods by which it can best be done, to keep open opportunities here and there by timely action, all this is a part of the daily work of practical city planning. The influence of such work extending over the whole city and slowly, steadily guiding a process which has the pressure of economic

law behind it will accomplish an enormous amount of good for housing in the old parts of any city that is not bound by a street plan so rigid and complete as to give no room for change.

But just as the greatest need in housing reform is to maintain a proper standard for the endless succession of new buildings that go up from year to year, so the greatest opportunity for usefulness in city planning is to control intelligently the layout of the streets and blocks which are coming into existence from day to day in the suburban zone of every city. Here the housing conditions of the future are being determined at an astonishing rate of speed, and here the application of intelligence and energy will accomplish great results for little cost.